



Pick Your Path to Health

Codependence: A Problem Affecting Millions of Women

Brenda has been married for 7 years. She discovered that her husband had a drinking problem during the first year of her marriage. Now 6 years later, Brenda lives in a constant state of anxiety—will James come home drunk tonight? Will she have to bail him out of jail again? Will she have to call his boss and make up excuses again about why he will be late? The whole thing makes her so angry, and she feels so helpless.

What Brenda is experiencing is known as codependency. It's a tough concept to define, but Co-Dependents Anonymous states that "codependents tend to be overly concerned with another person's problem and ignore their own wants and needs while taking extraordinary care of the other." The National Council on Codependence, Inc., explains that codependence "refers to how some past events starting in our childhood 'unknowingly' affect some of our attitudes, behaviors, and feelings in the present, often with destructive consequences."

No matter how you define it, one thing is certain: codependence is a serious problem affecting millions of Americans. Without help, those suffering from codependence experience lives of sadness, anger, fear, and loneliness. With help, though, people conquer their issues and find happiness.

Who is at risk?

Children raised in alcoholic families or other severely dysfunctional environments are most at-risk for developing codependency issues later in life. These children witness unhealthy family roles and learn to make their way in the family system without making too much noise or calling too much attention to themselves. Their sole mission becomes easing the burden for the alcoholic and for other members of the family affected by the alcoholic's actions. These children do not learn to focus on themselves—they do not consider who they are, what they feel, or what they want.

Girls, more so than boys, are often encouraged to adopt such "caretaker" roles as children. Thus, as adults, women are particularly susceptible to codependency.

How do I know if I am codependent?

Below are some patterns of codependency, as described on the Web site of Co-Dependents Anonymous:

Denial Patterns:

- I have difficulty identifying what I am feeling.
- I minimize, alter, or deny how I truly feel.
- I perceive myself as completely unselfish and dedicated to the well being of others.

Low Self Esteem Patterns:

- I have difficulty making decisions.
- I judge everything I think, say or do harshly, as never "good enough."
- I am embarrassed to receive recognition and praise or gifts.
- I do not ask others to meet my needs or desires.
- I value others' approval of my thinking, feelings, and behavior over my own.
- I do not perceive myself as a lovable or worthwhile person.

Compliance Patterns:

- I compromise my own values and integrity to avoid rejection or others' anger.
- I am very sensitive to how others are feeling and feel the same.
- I am extremely loyal, remaining in harmful situations too long.
- I value others' opinions and feelings more than my own and am afraid to express differing opinions and feelings of my own.
- I put aside my own interests and hobbies in order to do what others want.
- I accept sex when I want love.

Control Patterns:

- I believe most other people are incapable of taking care of themselves.
- I attempt to convince others of what they "should" think and how they "truly" feel.
- I become resentful when others will not let me help them.
- I freely offer others advice and directions without being asked.
- I lavish gifts and favors on those I care about.
- I use sex to gain approval and acceptance.

- I have to be "needed" in order to have a relationship with others.

Where to Go for Help

As adults, women have the means to seek help. And while asking for help can feel like the most unnatural thing in the world for a codependent woman, it is critical for her to take that step. If you identified with some of the statements above, talk to a mental health professional. Your life need not be filled with the sadness, anger, fear, and loneliness that you feel today. Look in the phone book under "mental health" or contact Co-Dependents Anonymous at (602) 277-7991 or online at www.codependents.org.

Help is available. Take that first step today and see how the path to health unfolds.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."